

No Guru, No Method, No Teacher: “Grant Morrison” and GrantMorrison™

1. Introduction

My title comes from Van, not Grant, Morrison; not just because of a fondness for the music of my compatriot, but because it sums up both the worldview of my main subject and my own complex and contradictory responses to his work. As a writer, Morrison attracts admiration and odium in roughly equal measure, a sign generally of his attempts to innovate within the medium of comics, and more specifically of the key element of his work I wish to examine here, the extent to which he foregrounds his own presence within his texts. His work displays a continual questioning of established value systems – religious, political and artistic – and a simultaneous elevation of personae who are clearly meant to be read as avatars of Morrison himself, placed in and acting through his comics. As Jacques Bens wrote in his analysis of Boris Vian’s *L’Ecume des jours*:

Tout écrivain refait le monde, soit parce qu’il est impuissant à restituer parfaitement une réalité dont la structure complexe échappe à la parole, *soit parce qu’il a envie de libérer ses démons familiers* [my italics] (177).

[All authors remake the world, either because it is impossible to perfectly reconstruct a reality of which the structure is too complex to capture in language, *or because they wish to loose their personal demons*]

The “personal demons” (and the occult reference is entirely fitting for a writer who makes much play of the idea of magic as a belief system) Morrison liberates are overwhelmingly linked to the relationship between himself and his writing. What I will do here is present a series of reflections on the interconnection between the personal and the textual as they appear in Morrison’s work, focussing on the problematic nature of the relationship between text, author and audience, and the way in which Morrison invites and requires us to develop our own readings, not just of the works themselves, but of the figure of Morrison himself and the wider connections he draws with the fictional universes and continuity-riddled realms his characters

inhabit. As even the most cursory reading of his comics shows, they are replete with references to and reworkings of at times highly obscure moments from the comics canon, from the appearances of reworked DC Thompson characters such as Robot Archie and General Jumbo in his early *2000 AD* strip *Zenith* to the recycling of ‘the Batman of Zur-En-Arrh’ in *Batman RIP*.

Interviewed by Patrick Meaney, Morrison states that he expects his readers to engage with references like these, and to experience his works, not as texts complete in themselves, but as starting points for their own explorations. For him, reading is above all a *creative* act:

It seemed to me to be really interesting to do a Batman story that implicated Batman’s publishing history, so that you would have to go and read up old comics. [...] I wanted people to be on Wikipedia, looking up obscure terms from Tzog-Chen Buddhism to understand stories. [...] It allowed people to think and to talk and to create stories of their own, in their heads, and narratives of their own. (Meaney 299)

Morrison invites his readers not just to react to his work but to interact with it, and this should be taken as the starting point for a critical investigation, not just of his own writing, but of the medium of comics as a whole. By continually calling our attention to both the links between his works and the texts which have inspired them, and by focusing on the nature of a 2-D fictional universe contained within our 3-D world, he asks us to consider at the deepest possible level the question of how we should examine comics as a form. It is this love of metatextuality and autocritique which I would see as quintessentially ‘Morrisonian’, a central element of his artistic *modus operandi*, which operates simultaneously with a reverence for and a love of the power and simple pleasure afforded by the comics form. What follows is an examination of the way in which he plays with the porous nature of the division between ‘author’ and ‘text’, and above all of the way in which his highly self-conscious use of authorial personae leads to an ever-greater elevation of his own status within the works themselves. Such an approach is, I will argue, potentially problematic, but to begin, some general considerations of the relationship between author and canon.

1. What is it That Makes Grant Morrison so Different and so Appealing?

And so we return and begin again. (Morrison, *The Invisibles*, 1: 1, 1)

Any act of criticism is inevitably both a new beginning and a recapitulation, always already circumscribed and constrained by the need to ground our analysis upon the text under examination and the body of scholarship which has shaped our own critical perspective. Like the artists we study, we are caught between Eliot's twin poles of "Tradition and the Individual Talent," our desire to say something truly new and restricted by the knowledge of our debt to an ever-living critical past:

No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead. [...] And he is not likely to know what is to be done unless he lives in what is not merely the present, but the present moment of the past, unless he is conscious, not of what is dead, but of what is already living. (Eliot, 15, 22)

If there is one writer working in the field of comics today who exemplifies this relationship between history and originality, it is surely Grant Morrison. With a substantial body of works for DC and Marvel, his writing has largely (but not overwhelmingly) consisted of reworking many of these publishers' most famous characters; with *The Trial of Diana Prince*, due in 2015, he will have written all three members of the "DC Trinity." In a recent talk at the British Library, "The (Super)Hero with 1000 Faces", Morrison summed up the way in which he sees his own writing as inseparable from and indebted to the past:

I think what these stories do is give you a particular structure, you know, a little bit like a Greek myth or a fable, and you can work within that structure and bend it slightly, and that's where the excitement lies, in the depth of these characters [...] What attracted me to DC in the first place was the 70 year history, and the idea that these characters were represented in different ways in different decades,

so for instance my version of Batman tried to accommodate all of these versions [...] what makes them interesting is not the idea that these characters could be read as believable, but that they actually exist as, as weird repeated memes that can be played with, so the history and the endlessness of them is what excites me, and the variation in the characters excites me.

One of the joys of studying a writer like Morrison is the way he plays with the fictional histories of his characters, lending them depth through the deliberate reference to and reworking of their existence within canon. This is never done as mere fan service or in-joke; in the discussion at the British Library, he refers to working with pre-existing characters as analogous to the blues, where a strictly limited structure of 12 bars can be endlessly varied: “you can play an old swamp blues or you can play like Jimi Hendrix.” For a reader who shares a knowledge of the material Morrison is using, his texts are rich in resonances and riffs on past stories, a truly Eliotic building of present creation on the basis of the past, as with his triumphant resurrection of such Silver Age elements as Batmite and (as previously mentioned) the “Batman of Zur-en-Arrh” within the much darker context of *Batman RIP*.

Even when Morrison is writing out of canon, dealing with characters with no relationships to previous comics, we see him layering in references to other texts. Consider how *Flex Mentallo* is inspired by something as apparently utterly insignificant as the Charles Atlas adverts; on balance, it is hard to think of a more perfect symbol of the aspirational, transformational power of the superhero. More than this, in a multi-volume series, like *The Invisibles*, he deliberately sets up moments in the text which recur time and again, each time with a slightly different nuance or contextual value, for example the events in the church in Philadelphia (*The Invisibles*, 1: 9), which were initially portrayed as Lovecraftian body horror, but eventually revealed to be the discovery of a fractal “timesuit,” donned by John-a-Dreams to seed himself throughout the narrative as a whole. (It could be argued that what we see here is actually an act of fragmentation, where the stable “self” is shattered and spread across the fictional universe of the narrative, but the deliberate references to fractals and the idea of identity as a serpent-like chain of being running through time which recurs throughout *The Invisibles* argues against this. It is less that John-a-Dreams is split into different characters than that he appears throughout the work in different avatars or manifestations.) A smaller but no less

resonant example, which displays to perfection the way in which Morrison structures his narratives around what we might call “internal intertextuality,” occurs over two issues of the first volume of *The Invisibles* (see Fig.1 below). In Issue 1, King Mob rescues Dane from Harmony House, killing the stock disposable cannon fodder of the guards. Then, in issue 12, Morrison tells the story of one of the guards, and the human consequences of King Mob's actions are brought home, with the repetition of the events from the first issue, given a pathos and emotional weight by their place between Bobby's proposal to his future wife and a return to the childhood game of “Best Man Fall” that gives the issue its title.

INSERT IMAGE 1 AND IMAGE 2 HERE: SIDE BY SIDE

Fig. 1. *The Invisibles*, 1: 1, 35 and 1: 12, 23: a single moment spread across a year.

Typical of the cyclic, non-linear timescale of the series as a whole, this is both clever and complex, a typical example of the way in which *The Invisibles* can be read as quasi-fractal, tiny moments within the text reflecting the meaning of the entire work; it is also putting a heavy demand on the reader. *The Invisibles* was initially published monthly; these two issues were published a year apart, and to truly appreciate what Morrison was doing, the reader had to remember two panels over the course of twelve months. This is, however, what Morrison wants his readers to do, and he has welcomed the growth of online fora such as barbelith.com (where *The Invisibles* was dissected issue by issue) as a key aspect of what he wishes his works to achieve. The texts are living, growing entities, nourished and nurtured by their readers, and they and their characters are seen as having an existence beyond their simple status as printed artefacts. As Morrison puts it:

When you start thinking about it for what's really going on, how do you imbue an ink mark with feeling? What happens? The feeling only appears when the consciousness of the readers comes in and a hologram is formed between the creator [and] the reader with the comic book in the middle. And the thing comes to life, to the point where people can sit, with tears streaming down their eyes, at *We3*, when there's nothing there except ink and paper. (Meaney 313-4)

To coin a phrase, “It’s alive!”

2. Tulpas, Transrealism, and Texts: Morrison as Transgressor.

The rooms in story drawings are rooms real in where true people live. (Moore and Campbell 47)

As Special Agent Dale Cooper puts it in *Twin Peaks* (the episode “Traces To Nowhere”), “By way of explaining what we are about to do, I’m going to first talk to you about the country called Tibet.” In Alexandra David-Neel’s *Magic and Mystery In Tibet*, a work which Morrison has clearly read - cf *The Invisibles* 1: 8, 11 for a direct reference -, she refers to a particular type of Tibetan supernatural phenomenon, “*tulpas*, magical formations generated by a powerful concentration of thoughts” (219). Through the exercise of “the prescribed concentration of thought and other rites” (221), David-Neel creates a *tulpa* of her own, “a monk, short and fat, of an innocent and jolly type” (221). She then has to spend six months removing the *tulpa* from existence. In *Supergods*, Morrison discusses Alan Schwartz’s claim to have encountered “Superman in the form of a *tulpa*” (408), as with the meeting that he and Dan Respler supposedly had with a similar manifestation at the 1999 Comicon, an event he describes as “a visitation,” “a validation,” (403) and “the Superman who appeared at the precise moment I needed him the most” (406). Whether or not we accept the literal truth of these events is irrelevant to my argument here; what matters is that the *tulpa* is the perfect embodiment (a term deliberately chosen) of Morrison’s view of the creative process. As he says in *Supergods*:

I didn’t have to meet Superman in the flesh to believe in him. He was already real for me, in glorious 2-D continuity, in the DC universe. A comic book, like any object created by human minds and hands, is already a tulpa: What else is it but a thought so perfectly condensed from brain electricity onto paper and ink that someone can hold it in their hands? (408)

Morrison is obsessed with the idea of evolution and transcendence, but here he shows what our species is already able to achieve; *Homo sapiens*, *Homo narrans* and *Homo faber*, we build stories to reify our imagination and beliefs. The events and characters in comics may not be real, but that does not deny their *truth*, a point made in this section's epigraph from Alan Moore. In *the Invisibles*, Morrison talks of how our identities are constructed, isolating us from true communion from creation — “all the things you left outside when you were building your little house called ‘me’” (*The Invisibles*, 3:12, 18) — and he returns to the image of construction in *Supergods*: “Writers and artists build by hand little worlds that they hope might effect change in real minds, in the real world where stories are read” (409). I contended earlier that comics studies must embrace a multimodal, multidisciplinary approach, regarding the form as something approaching a true *Gesamtkunstwerk*, and that Morrison's work is particularly fruitful for study in this vein, as it continually plays on the interaction between image and text, and the relationship between physical artefact and the reader. This does not mean that I regard Morrison as an artist *sui generis*; the idea of self-reflexive works of art can be traced back from postmodernism and modernism to the *mise en abyme* of paintings as venerable as Velasquez's *Las Meñinas* or the millennium-old fresco of the Hagia Sophia which depicts the church within stands the picture itself, while the trope of narratives conscious of their own fictionality is, as Nabokov put it, “as old as the quills” (Gold 197). Morrison is an original artist, to be sure, but he is too honest and intelligent a writer not to make clear his debt to a wide range of previous artists and influences, in both comics and beyond. More than this, it is possible to see him as writing within a very specific genre. Comics are the *form* within which he works; if we are to succeed in evaluating his work as a whole, we must move from consideration of form to an examination of the *mode* in which he works. The key lies in Douglas Wolk's marvellous summation of the hallmarks of Morrison's work:

... reality-bending meta fictional freakouts dressed up in action-adventure drag; metaphors that make visible the process by which language creates an image that in turn becomes narrative; a touch of feel-good self-improvement rhetoric; faith in the power of pop and popularity to do magic; and skinny bald men who are stand-ins for Morrison himself, heroically conquering sadness and making the world

evolve (258)

The list of features Wolk enumerates are not unique to Morrison, and as much of his work is devoted to the self-conscious reworking of tropes and events from earlier eras of comics, albeit filtered through his own sensibility, this should come as no surprise. However, it is possible to go further, and to trace a closer line of direct artistic kinship between Morrison and one of his contemporaries, the American mathematician and SF writer Rudy Rucker. In his address to the 2003 Readercon, Rucker outlines his conception of how he writes Science Fiction, and the scheme he presents is equally applicable to Morrison. The essentials of his creative *modus operandi* are presented in Fig. 2 below:

INSERT figure 2, “Rucker.png” here.

FIGURE 2. Rucker’s model of Science Fiction (“Power Chords, Thought Experiments, Transrealism and Monomyths,” 1.)

And summarized with his declaration that “each one of my novels is in fact a mixture of classic SF power chords, fresh thought experiments, transreal observations of my immediate life, and (often unconsciously used) archetypal mono mythic story patterns” (3). Even the briefest of considerations will I hope show the way in which Rucker’s model maps neatly onto Morrison’s work. Both writers ground their own creations on the basis of archetypal story patterns; Morrison continually reworks both world mythologies (e.g. Tibetan Buddhism in *Batman* and *The Invisibles*, the Campbellian hero journey in *Joe the Barbarian*) and the quasi-mythic narratives of the classic comics canon. Both also revel in the self-conscious use of what Rucker terms “a core of classic SF ideas that I think of as “power chords” — the equivalent of heavy musical riffs that people instantly respond to. A more formal word would be ‘tropes’” (1). Rucker’s list of the Classic SF “power chords” is very close to Wolk’s description of the Morrisonian trope-horde:

Blaster guns, spaceships, time machines, aliens, telepathy, flying saucers, warped space, faster-than-light travel, holograms, immersive virtual reality, robots, teleportation, endless shrinking, levitation, antigravity, generation starships,

ecodisaster, blowing up Earth, pleasure-centre zappers, mind viruses, the attack of the giant ants, and the fourth dimension. (1)

Like Rucker, Morrison also engages in “thought experiments”, either finding a new way of examining a classic trope, or injecting a new thematic element, subject area or theoretical element into the traditional mix. Rucker’s explanation of his artistic version of Einstein’s *Gedenkenexperiment* is very close to what Morrison achieves in his riffing on the 12-bar blues of the traditional comics form: “I call it a science-fictional “thought experiment” when an author either makes up a brand-new power chord or extensively works out some of the consequences of an older power chord” (3). This is surely a perfect definition of Morrison’s tradition-dependent originality; not only does he rework the classic tropes and characters, he injects a huge amount of new ideas and issues into the form. It is hard, if not impossible, to think of another writer within comics whose range of reference is broad, from Stanislav Grof to Terence McKenna to Noel Coward and beyond (cf the annotations to *The Invisibles* at <http://www.barbelith.com/bomb/>.)

Thirdly, both authors explicitly bring themselves into their works, twin exponents of what Rucker terms “Transrealism”. In Rucker’s “Transrealist Manifesto”, he argues that this is a literary mode that collapses traditional genre divisions, and allows a cross-fertilization of speculative, fantastic, and mundane fiction:

[...] the Transrealist writes about immediate perceptions in a fantastic way. Any literature which is not about actual reality is weak and enervated. But the genre of straight realism is all burnt out. Who needs more straight novels? The tools of fantasy and SF offer a means to thicken and intensify realistic fiction. By using fantastic devices it is actually possible to manipulate subtext. The familiar tools of SF — time travel, antigravity, alternate worlds, telepathy, etc. — are in fact symbolic of archetypal modes of perception. [...] this is the “Trans” aspect. The “realism” aspect has to do with the fact that a valid work of art should deal with the world the way it actually is. Transrealism tries to treat not only immediate reality, but also the higher reality in which life is embedded. (1)

In addition, note above all Rucker’s statement that:

In a Transrealist novel, the author usually appears as an actual character, or his or her personality is divided among several characters. [...] If, indeed, you are writing about immediate perceptions, then what point of view other than your own self is possible? (“Transrealist Manifesto” 1-2)

From *Animal Man* to *Seven Soldiers*, Morrison has never been afraid to place himself within his own works as a character; he claims to enter his stories by donning a “fiction suit”, as a means of influencing the narrative through direct interaction with the other characters and in turn engineering change in one’s own character in the world beyond the text. This is a central concept in Morrison’s work, but as Meaney says:

Understanding the exact nature of the fiction suit is tricky because Morrison’s definition of the concept and the way it’s been used in popular discourse, since the series’ release, are quite different [...] For Morrison, a fiction suit is to works of fiction what an astronaut’s suit is to space. It is what people in our reality put on to enter works of fiction. [...] This concept of “fiction suit” serves as an allegory for what a writer does whenever he or she writes fiction – and also for the experience that a reader has when becoming immersed in a story. (12)

Pace Barthes, the writer is of course always present within the text, not necessarily in the Joycean position of omniscient immanence, but at the very least as the focal point through which pass the “multiple writings, issuing from several cultures and entering into dialogue with each other, into parody, into contestation” (“The Death of The Author” 316) of which it is composed. We can trace a further connection between Barthes and Rucker and Morrison’s insertion of author into work in the passage in “From Work To Text” where Barthes argues that the presence of a writer in his or her work is that of an entity:

[...] inscribed in the novel like one of his characters, figured in the carpet; no longer privileged, paternal, aletheological, his inscription is ludic. He becomes, as

it were, a paper-author: his life is no longer the origin of his fictions but a fiction contributing to his work. (161)

In *Hunting the Dark Knight*, Will Brooker makes many perceptive connections between Barthes' concept of authorial presence and Morrison's version of Batman, but the links are present throughout the latter's work as a whole. Both Morrison and Rucker share a quasi-Barthesian desire to collapse the hierarchy of "author" and created "work" and set up in its place a more complex relationship between writer and text, where the two entwine and influence each other.

As regards tropes, ideas and the role of the author, then, it seems that Morrison can fruitfully be examined through the critical lens of Transrealism, and it will be interesting to see if others also pick up on the connections between Morrison's work and Rucker's. The final, and to my mind crucial, link between Morrison and Transrealism lies in Rucker's claim in "A Transrealist Manifesto," that it is "a revolutionary art-form", which seeks to overthrow "a major tool in mass thought-control [...] the myth of consensus reality" (2). Running through Morrison's work is the dominant idea that our "reality" is merely a provisional, distorted and appallingly limited fragment of the truth. From *Zenith* to *The Invisibles* to *Flex Mentallo* and beyond, his works in general and his heroes in particular preach a message of transcendence and liberation, seeking to free the reader from the confines of doctrinaire thought and the very concept of a fixed "self". In his introduction to Morrison's *Lovely Biscuits*, Stewart Home argues:

Grant Morrison finds himself in the almost unique position of being ignored by literary critics because his writing is both popular and self-consciously textual. The success of comics such as *The Invisibles* and *Dare* do not endear Morrison to those who believe that identities are simple constants rather than things that are endlessly remade. Morrison's blurring of boundaries between fiction and non-fiction, critical insight and satire, narrative and cyclic return, destabilize every category that traditional literary criticism is struggling to uphold. (iii)

Home, like Morrison, emerges from a subculture, indeed a counterculture, in his case the intellectual avant-garde of experimental fiction and the fissiparous movements of Neoism and

above all Situationism. Like Morrison, he plays with authorial identity in his work, adopting the Neoist collective pseudonyms of “Monty Cantsin” and “Karen Eliot”. He also reworks and blends challenging theory with popular culture, in his case the “Skinhead” novels of Richard Allen. Above all, like Morrison and Rucker, he seeks to be an *agent provocateur* on the cultural plane, forcing the reader to shake off the complacent acceptance of the social and political *status quo*. To talk of Home and/or Morrison as “Situationist” writers is problematic, as “Situationism” is less a coherent movement than, as Wark puts it, “a number of fractious groups, playing off and against one another, challenging one another” (108). Home has rejected the label, even if he continues to write on the group and to employ key Situationist techniques as psychogeography. Morrison displays a similar indebtedness to the movement, above all in *The Invisibles*. Within the series, we see explicit reference to ideas such as *détournement* and the *derive*, and as Meaney points out, the cover of *The Invisibles* 2:13 featured direct quotation of Situationist slogans, with:

[...] all the characters’ dialogue balloons obscured by typed dialogue. [This is a nod to such Situationist texts as André Bertrand’s *Le Retour de la colonne Durutti*] King Mob’s said, “We are now leaving the 20th century! Join the Revolution! Demand the Impossible! Overthrow the spectacle! Beneath the sidewalks, the beach! Disobey all imperatives! (156, note 6.)

David Faust presents an excellent analysis of Morrison’s use of selected Situationist tropes, most notably psychogeography, within *Seven Soldiers of Victory* and *Final Crisis*, and there are clearly many other references to unearth, but as with Transrealism, Situationism may at the very least offer us another critical perspective for the reading of his work. Above all, Situationism speaks to two key themes in his writing. The first is the desire to democratize the struggle for self-expression, allowing the reader to assume a creative role. This mirrors perfectly the Situationist desire to let everyone participate in the creation of a life, which is itself a work of art. As Christopher Gray puts it:

Imagination should be applied directly to the transformation of reality itself, not to its symbols in the form of philosophy, literature, painting, etc. Equally, this transformation should not be in the hands of a small body of specialists but should

be made by everyone. It was normal everyday life that should be made passionate and rational and dramatic, not its reflection in a separated “world of art”. (4)

Secondly, Situationism argues that modern consumer society is, in Debord’s terms, a “rigged game” (Debord 39). Any attempt to rebel will be reappropriated into the all-consuming maw of the mass-media dominated, market-oriented “society of the spectacle.” The way forward, for Morrison as much as for Debord and his fellow combatants, lies in subversion, *détournement*, and a corresponding reappropriation of the tropes of consumer society for revolutionary ends. Combining “Pop Magick” and “ontological terrorism”², Morrison has recently taken what may be his most radical step as an artist to date. We have had Morrison the writer and Morrison the character; we have now entered the age of Morrison the brand.

3. Persona, Sigil, Brand: the birth of Grant Morrison™

Puto deus fio (Vespasian attr.)

He’s not the Messiah. He’s a very naughty boy. (*Monty Python and the Life of Brian*)

Comics are of course as much economic as cultural artefacts. DC and Marvel are mere branches of complex, proliferating commercial entities, of value to their owners not just as products in themselves but as the source of greater revenue, through film and TV adaptation, merchandising, and the like. We live in an era of transnational capital, where the power of the nation state appears to be waning in comparison to the ever-growing influence of tentacular, distributed corporate power. To date, Morrison’s most successful work, measured in terms of sales, has been that produced for the market leaders, DC and Marvel, and this has allowed him to insert a number of interesting observations on the nature of modern corporate capitalism into the comics. It is impossible to read Morrison as a doctrinaire “anticapitalist;” his obsession with the figure of

² Nick James offers a sharp investigation of this concept through a consideration of Morrison’s work in relation to theories of Anarchism.

the superhero, arguably the ultimate avatar of the individualistic, self-help ethos of Western individualism mitigates against that. There is nothing in his work to compare with the *engagé* anger of a character like Spain's *Trashman* or China Miéville's sadly rejected pitch for a Communist hive-mind-driven *Iron Man*, fighting oppression in the post-industrial wasteland of a fictionalized Detroit (Miéville, "Rejected Pitch"). Morrison's version of a young Superman in his run on *Action Comics* is, he claims in *Supergods*, a deliberate attempt to return to the idea of what sees as the origins of the character as a blue-collar hero:

[...] an image of a fiercely human tomorrow that delivered the spectacle of triumphant individualism exercising its sovereignty over the implacable forces of industrial oppression. It's no surprise that he was a big hit with the oppressed. He was as resolutely lowbrow, as pro-poor, as any Savior born in a pigsty. (7)

However, this is still Romantic heroic individualism, rather than any sense of collective struggle. It is simply not possible to read Morrison as a "political" writer on any other than the loosest of levels. Unlike Miéville, or a work like Brian Vaughan's *Ex Machina* or Warren Ellis' *Transmetropolitan*, he never displays any desire to engage with issues of economic reality or practical governance. Sexual and identity politics, yes, but never party politics, and this is not necessarily a flaw, simply a sign that his interests lie elsewhere. What we can see, above all in *The Invisibles* and his work on *Batman*, is a desire to engineer change, not by overt rebellion, but by subversion within and *détournement* of the system. The most obvious example of this is the evolution of King Mob in *The Invisibles*, who moves from gun-toting assassin to memetic shaman, finally vanquishing the King-of-All-Tears with a gun which fires, not a bullet, but an idea (REF). As he says, "Thought I'd opt for ontological terrorism [...] Bond is dead." (*The Invisibles* 2: 22, 16). Ultimate victory in *The Invisibles* comes through the reappropriation of the mechanisms and media of consumer society in a way which nods to both classic Situationism and the more knowing deployment of consumerist tropes seen in the punk era (it should be remembered that "King Mob" was the name of a Situationist group with whom Malcom McLaren was connected):

That's capitalism for you, Jack. No one wants to stop it because everyone wants to own it. Hurry while stocks last. I use the en-eh-mee... (*The Invisibles*, 3: 1, 8).

In an interview for *Wired*, Morrison discusses his work on *Batman Inc.* and his decision to transform the hero from individual agent to global crimefighting brand, with Bruce Wayne acting as corporate bankroller, the Rupert Murdoch of a new era of superheroism as franchise:

I got the idea from looking back through my *Batman* research, and suddenly there was the *Batman* symbol from Tim Burton's film. But it also looked like a gaping mouth. [Laughs] It made the Batman symbol a giant, gobbling capitalist. So I wanted to take that branding and put it in the hands of Batman himself. [...] most corporations seem pretty demonic. Corporations as entities are strange things. Because no one person is really in charge, we've conjured some predatory, ravenous entities. But *Batman, Inc.* is an attempt to reimagine what a good corporation can be. ("Grant Morrison's *Batman, Inc.* Births Comics' First Zen Billionaire")

Subversion of or capitulation to the System? As we shall see, not all readers view Morrison's engagement with the Establishment with unconditional approval. Note at this point the conflation of two key Morrisonian tropes: incorporation as reification, with the hero embodying essential beliefs and ideals, and iconicity, with ideas reduced to an easily assimilated but semiotically dense image, brand – or sigil. Morrison's interest in magic, in particular the magical art of Austin Osman Spare, comes through loud and clear at this point; as Meaney says, "Morrison has equated corporate symbols with hypersigils, which determine our view of reality" (266). As Scott McCloud points out, superheroes are quintessentially iconic, reducible to a single logo and color combination (*Understanding Comics* 188). The perfect base for a highly charged message, whether consciousness-expanding or commercially-driven. Ever the multidisciplinary, Morrison seeks to blend magic(k) with commerce, using his heroes as vehicles/logos/sigils to "brand" – a conveniently polyvalent term – his messages in to the reader's brain. Having urged his readers to perform an act of sexual sigil magic to increase sales of *The Invisibles* (cf the letters pages of volume 1: 16, 25), in *Batman Inc.* he takes this further,

erasing the boundaries between spirituality and commerce, between fictional and factual “realities”. As the key alchemical dictum puts it, “As Above, So Below,” implying an inseparable bond between levels of creation, and the complex interactions between Morrison’s life and work embody this. We have seen that he sees the two as inextricably linked, and as Bruce Wayne and King Mob enter the corporate world, so he has done the same:

It was kind of something to do, you know? Kristan [my wife] and I set up our own little company to do stuff and to deal with corporate entities. So it was like creating a little angel or a little familiar and setting it loose to do its stuff.”
(Meaney 298)

The Morrisonian hero embodies, incarnates beliefs; Morrison reifies himself within a fictional world, either as the “writer” in *Animal Man*, or as any number of, in Wolk’s words, “skinny bald men who are standins for Morrison himself” (258) – Lex Luthor, Professor X, Zor, Leo Quintum.... In a similar process, he autofictionalizes himself in the 3-D World, shaving his head, crossdressing, conducting magical rites, not just creating King Mob, but becoming him in order to recreate himself, as he puts it in *Supergods*: “My world and his drawn universe had blurred at the edges, and blended together” (287).

From author to character, from character to sigil or brand, he has deliberately reworked his appearance, into a form which links not just to a character of his own invention, but to deeply resonant figures within the wider canon of comics. Simultaneously, he has assumed a steadily more prominent profile within the mass media and popular culture as a whole. As the status of comics as an artform has risen, or as their influence within culture and as a revenue source has become unavoidable, so Morrison has become a readily-available source of expert knowledge for the mainstream media. While he has yet to break through into TV or film, he has become ever more visible to that most desirable of consumer groups, the late adolescents, those who have not yet formed the brand loyalties that will tend to stay with them for the rest of their lives. As Morrison has said, “my dream reader is the bright 14-year-old, whose mind is open to this stuff and just getting into it for the first time.” (Meaney 340); it is hard not to see a canny confluence of mutual admiration and marketing opportunity in his decision to appear in two videos for the band My Chemical Romance (“Na Na Na” and “SING”, both in 2010). In an era of multi-media,

cross-platform branding, Morrison has shown a real awareness of the power of popular media for disseminating his work and his self-image.

Above all, there is *Supergods*, Morrison's deeply personal, deeply partial history of comics, which presents the form as overwhelmingly American and British, with no real discussion of non-Anglophone or non-commercial works; Kirby and Claremont, but no Crumb or Crepax, Hawkman but no Hernandez Brothers, next to no manga (barring one very brief paragraph on p.50), , but a great deal of Morrison. (There is also much to be made of the all-but-complete lack of discussion of female contributors to the form, but this, as with the much wider issue the depiction of women within Morrison's work as a whole, would require a much longer study in itself.) It is of course a personal account of the form, but even so, it is interesting to see the way in which his discussion is skewed towards the areas in which he has sought to have the greatest impact, and correspondingly how he presents the contributions of others in the field. A brief and undeniably crude statistical analysis, simply enumerating the number of references in the text to fellow British comics professionals of his generation and the one preceding, reveals the following data (note that the simple counting of tokens is a very rough-and ready means of measuring the significance attached to each author in *Supergods*; a deeper analysis needs to be done taking into account issues of collocation, length of sentence, *et al*):

TABLE 1: AUTHORS REFERENCED IN *Supergods*

<u>Author</u>	<u># of appearances in <i>Supergods</i></u>
<u>Warren Ellis</u>	<u>14</u>
<u>Garth Ennis</u>	<u>2</u>
<u>Neil Gaiman</u>	<u>8</u>
<u>Brendan McCarthy</u>	<u>6</u>
<u>Mark Millar</u>	<u>18</u>
<u>Pete Milligan</u>	<u>5</u>
<u>Alan Moore</u>	<u>33</u>

Looking at this, I find the lack of reference to Ennis and in particular Gaiman striking; the latter at least is arguably one of the most important writers within modern British and

American comics, but he does not write “mainstream” superhero works, and hence he is erased from the domain. The same is true of Ennis (who has repeatedly made clear his distaste for the superhero genre) and Warren Ellis; he appears in *Supergods* because of his work on *The Authority*, which Morrison wrote after Ellis left the series. The two British writers who appear most frequently in *Supergods* are Mark Millar and Alan Moore. The first is a writer who has gone on to achieve the success in film that to date has evaded Morrison, and who is presented in the book as cheapening the idealistic glory of comics in works like *Wanted* and *Kick-Ass*. In an interview with the Mindless Ones blog at the time of *Supergods*’ publication, Morrison dispatches Millar to his own equivalent of the Forbidden Zone: “I wish him well but there’s not good feeling between myself and Mark for many reasons most of which are he destroyed my faith in human fucking nature.” (“Grant Morrison Supergods Interview Transcript”). Morrison rejects the man who was in many ways his protégé; he does the same with Moore, one of his greatest inspirations, the British writer who first showed that comics did not have to be a purely American form, and who rewrote the rules of what could be done within it. Morrison does, as we can see, discuss Moore at length, but his treatment of the older writer is problematic, focusing on “issues” within his work rather than acknowledging the huge debt he and all subsequent British comics writers owe to Moore. We could read the tensions between these writers as no more than the typical clash of authorial egos, or a comics version of the internecine conflicts that regularly erupted among the Situationists, but as regards the Moore/Morrison relationship, there seems to be something deeper going on, akin to the split that arose between Freud and Jung. I am not overly partial to psychoanalytic criticism, but there is an undeniably Oedipal tang to the spat between these two writers, as the younger begins by wanting to be like the elder and ends by wishing to slay him. This is certainly how Moore views it, as a reading of the interview he gave to Pádraig Ó Méalóid earlier this year clearly shows. This is a long and fascinating discussion, where Moore is responding to criticism of his depiction of racial and sexual stereotypes in his work, and his comments on Morrison form only a very small element of the whole; to extract them and quote them out of context, is arguably unfair, but they do show how Moore views Morrison as parasitizing his own work and seeking to build up his own creative and public reputation:

What I at first believed to be the actions of an ordinary comic-business career plagiarist came to take on worrying aspects of cargo cultism, as if this funny little man believed that by simply duplicating all of my actions, whether he understood them or not, he could somehow become me and duplicate my success. [...] The announcement sometime later that our neo-punk firebrand had accepted an M.B.E from the current pauper-culling coalition government, naturally, only confirmed me in the wisdom of my decision: I don't want to associate with people I consider to be massively privileged Tories, nor with anyone who doesn't see anything wrong in doing so. I particularly wish to avoid all of those who have struck rebellious or radical poses while always remaining careful not to offend their employers or to make any kind of moral or political statement that may later jeopardize their career prospects (Moore, "Last Alan Moore Interview?")

Moore's final dismissal of Morrison is devastating: "someone who, when I bother to think of him at all, I think of as a Scottish tribute band." Comics fandom is rabid enough without launching into a Twihard-esque turf war between Team Alan and Team Grant (the reference is to the fandom associated with Stephanie Meyer's *Twilight* series, and the battling supporters of the male protagonists of the series, who dub themselves "Team Edward" and "Team Jacob"), but the question of the links of influence and common themes between the two mens' work will deserve close examination. At issue here is the fact that not everyone sees the Morrison brand as the market leader, and some might argue that a work like *Supergods* amounts to something perilously close to knocking copy. To play with personae and personality is entirely acceptable, but at times Morrison's deployment of himself as prime subject for his work, and by extension the chief topic of interest for his readers, seems overly self-aggrandizing. No-one could object to a convention devoted to a single writer; but when the writer himself organizes (or "curates") the event, and charges \$700 a ticket, as he did for "Morrisoncon" in 2012, we seem to be going to extremes. This is of course *ad hominem* criticism; but given the centrality of the man to his own work, how can we do otherwise? Morrison is, as I have argued, an author who places himself at the center of his work, and who encourages his readers to think for themselves and develop their own thoughts; if we are encouraged to question everything, he should not be surprised if we interrogate our responses to him. All literary criticism is based on informed personal response, its

quasi-empiricism based on the reader's own reaction to the text, and my reading of Morrison as advanced here is no exception. Roman emperors believed in the concept of the apotheosis, the belief that on death they became divine. Morrison claims that divinity is within the grasp of each and every one of us, through the portal of the narrative of transcendent superhuman characters. Arguably, he also seems to be verging on the active promotion of a cross-media, voodoo-like rite of autoapotheosis; it is the role of the disinterested critic to examine this, to question it, and, just perhaps, to play a similar role to the slave who rode in the chariot at the back of the individual granted a triumphal parade, repeating the words "Remember you are mortal". As a "new god" of a previous era recently put it, "Don't believe your own publicity" (Falzone, "Leif Garrett To Justin Bieber"). Particularly not when you write it yourself.

In conclusion, I site myself as reader, critic and fan of Morrison, hugely impressed by much he has done (*Zenith* and *The Invisibles* in particular), but also unwilling to grant him wholehearted, unquestioning admiration. The elements of his work I find most interesting are those where he moves away from himself and into the wider realms of comics as an intertextual, historically and thematically rich domain. At his best, he is a master synthesist, able to draw together a huge range of material, references and resonances, filtered through his own artistic lens; at worst, he becomes willfully obscurantist and, as I have argued, solipsistic. In *Supergods*, he gives a powerful argument for the value of comics as a source of quasi-religious liberation, free from the constraints of conventional religions:

By offering role models whose heroism and transcendent qualities would once have been haloed and clothed in floaty robes, they nurtured in me a sense of the cosmic and ineffable that the turgid, dogmatically stupid "dad" religions could never match. (416)

This is what Morrison, I feel, does best; he rejects the established pieties of ideology and mythology, whether of religion, politics or comics themselves, and opens the door to radical reworkings of tired, hackneyed forms and tropes, presenting his works as means for readers to reshape their own narratives for themselves – "no guru, no teacher, no method," as it were. Heterodoxy, however, has a tiresome habit of becoming the new orthodoxy, and Morrison's use of the authorial persona runs the risk of becoming just another mouthpiece for the writer's ideas,

rather than the much more interesting vehicle for examining the interplay between life and work, art and “reality.” Grant Morrison is now 54; the Young Turk is now a pillar of the Establishment. Throughout his career he has shown an ability to reinvent himself as artist and persona, and an awareness of the evolving *Zeitgeist* (see his discussions of Terence McKenna’s “Timewave Zero” and Iain Spence’s “Sekhmet Hypothesis” in *Supergods* (301 et seq.)); he also wrote for *Doctor Who Magazine* from 1986-88. It may be time for Morrison, like the Doctor, to regenerate.

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